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Overtures to Soldiers to Spy. For Soviet Bloc Said to Rise

By RICHARD HALLORAN

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WASHINGTON, June 18 — The Army says there has been an increase in reports of attempts by Soviet and other Eastern European intelligence services to recruit American soldiers as spies.

In interviews, Army officers said there were 481 incidents last year in which soldiers reported being approached by people they suspected of being Soviet or East European intelligence officers, or by sympathizers in nations such as West Germany. That was a 400 percent increase over 1978, the officers said.

Of those, they said, 94 cases were referred to Army counterintelligence for possible action. That would include having the American soldier act as a double agent to obtain information from those who had recruited him.

These contacts were disclosed after the Army began a review of its security procedures with the arrest of four present or former Navy men accused by Federal officials of participating in an espionage ring that the Government says was headed by John A. Walker Jr.

The officers said the Army opened 124 investigations of suspected approaches in the three months ended Dec. 31, the most recent period for which statistics were available. The majority were in the United States; 37 were in Europe and 15 in the Pacific region.

The Army counterintelligence program, Subversion and Espionage Directed Against the Army, is mainly an educational effort in which soldiers are instructed on signs of an intelligence approach and cautioned to report those to their superiors.

A spokesman for the Navy said everyone with clearance to see secret material was briefed periodically on watching for approaches by intelligence agents. In 1984, he said, the Naval Investigative Service gave 3,500 briefings for 211,000 Navy people. The spokesman said possible attempts to recruit sailors had been spotted but the Navy did not release such statistics.

A spokesman for the Air Force said his service had a similar program in which large numbers of officers and enlisted personnel were briefed. No details on recent experience were immediately available.

The Army officers said many attempts to recruit American soldiers as spies in Europe were made by Germans who might be Soviet agents or who were sympathetic to the Soviet Union. But they expressed confidence that the program had thwarted most of those efforts.

Families Often a Factor

In Europe, the officers said, soldiers whose families came from Eastern Europe have been targets for approach by East European intelligence services. American soldiers are permitted to travel to Eastern Europe on leave, at which time they may visit relatives.

In such instances, the officers said, intelligence agents of the East European nation would suggest to American

soldiers that life could be better for their relatives if they cooperated with the intelligence agents, or worse for their relatives if they did not cooperate.

In the United States, such a report from a soldier is turned over to Army counterintelligence. If there is evidence that a real recruiting effort has begun, the case is turned over to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which has jurisdiction over espionage.

If the attempted recruitment takes place overseas, the case is turned over to the internal security authorities of the host country. The Army has 225,000 soldiers stationed in Europe, most of them in West Germany.

Two Causes Cited in Rise

The officers said the increase in reported incidents under the Army program could be attributed to a combination of more approaches to American soldiers by foreign intelligence services and a greater alertness among soldiers.

The Army officers were less confident that they had prevented an American soldier with access to secret information from taking the initiative and selling that data to a foreign government. That pattern has appeared in many recent espionage cases.

"How do you know there's no Walker in the Army out there?" asked one officer rhetorically. "You don't know."

The Army officers said it would be difficult to uncover a soldier who had sought a buyer of information. As the Walker case has unfolded, they said, Army commanders have been reminded to watch for abnormal behavior that might hint at espionage.

Style of Life Observed

The officers said junior officers and sergeants were the key to spotting clues in a soldier who had access to secret information. The most obvious, they suggested, would be a soldier who suddenly started living on a scale that appeared to be beyond his Army pay.

In a successful double-agent operation, the officers said, Chief Warrant Officer Jamos Szmolka, who had left Hungary to become an American citizen and make a career in the Army, was stationed in West Germany. On authorized leaves, he went back to Budapest to visit his mother in 1978 and 1979.

On the third trip, he was approached by a man described as a Hungarian intelligence officer, Lajos Perlaki. If Mr. Szmolka provided information, Mr. Perlaki was reported to have said, the Budapest Government would see that living conditions improved for the Szmolka family.

Mr. Szmolka returned to West Germany and reported to his superiors. He was asked by Army counterintelligence to accept the Hungarian request and become a double agent. His mission was to uncover Hungarian intelligence operations.

For four years, Warrant Officer Szmolka was in contact with Hungarian agents in Europe and in the United States, to which he was transferred in normal rotation in 1980. Meantime, the Hungarians kept their promise to improve his family's life.

Finally, in 1982, the Army wanted to uncover the Hungarian intelligence network in the United States. Mr. Szmolka was told to inform the Hungarians through coded letters that he had valuable information to turn over.

On April 17 of that year Mr. Szmolka went to the Confederate monument in Augusta, Ga., near his post at Fort Gordon, to meet a Hungarian agent. But American counterintelligence agents were waiting and arrested the Hungarian, who was identified as Otto A. Gilbert.

Mr. Gilbert was described as an expatriate Hungarian who was a naturalized American citizen. Faced with life in prison for espionage, he bargained for a 15-year sentence by providing information that was useful not only to American counterintelligence but also to several European nations.

In Asia, an Army sergeant identified only as Smith was approached by a Soviet diplomat assigned to the embassy in Bangkok. Their common interest was chess, which the Russian used to cultivate Sergeant Smith over several months.

Like Warrant Officer Szmolka, Sergeant Smith reported to the authorities and began to operate as a counterintelligence agent, the officers said. Besides Bangkok, he reportedly met Soviet agents in New York, Tennessee, Germany, Mexico City and Colombia over 10 years.

In that time, he was asked for information on United States war plans, technology, military exercises, deployment of weapons and readiness of forces. In turn, he was able to gain information on Soviet intelligence operations.